Sustainable Table Issues: Family Farms

[[Printer Friendly](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/familyfarms/index_pf.html)](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/familyfarms/index_pf.html)The dramatic expansion of industrial agriculture (or [factory farming)](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/factoryfarming) has made it increasingly difficult for small family farmers in the U.S to stay in business. Instead, the food industry has become  dominated by a handful of giant corporations which benefit from [government policies](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/policy) that favor large-scale production.

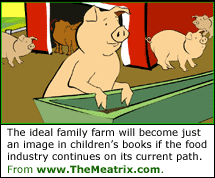
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| Family Farms |
| There are now nearly five million fewer farms in the U.S. than there were in the 1930's. Photo by [Jason Houston](http://www.jasonhouston.com). |

Family farmers are being forced out of business at an alarming rate. According to Farm Aid, every week 330 farmers leave their land.i As a result, there are now nearly five million fewer farms in the U.S. than there were in the 1930's.ii Of the two million remaining farms, only 565,000 are family operations.iii  As established family farms are shut down, they are not being replaced by new farms and young farmers.  Very few young people become farmers today, and half of all U.S. farmers are between the ages of 45 and 65, while only 6% of all farmers are under the age of 35.

Some people ask whether these sorts of changes are inevitable; they wonder if family farming is simply out-of-date in today’s global economy. Or they may think: if industrial agriculture can supply more food at a lower cost, doesn’t that benefit consumers?

[[The Meatrix Parlour!](http://www.sustainabletable.org/forum/)](http://www.sustainabletable.org/forum/)

If food were like car parts or other consumer products, it might. But because our [health](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/health), our [environment](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/environment), and our [communities](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/community) are so greatly affected by food production, the way food is produced and shipped matters just as much as what’s in the food. For many people, the connection between farm and fridge is vague at best. In an age where a handful of corporate food processors determine most of what we find in the supermarket, it is critical for consumers to learn about where their food comes from and make their own informed choices.

[[](http://www.themeatrix.com/)](http://www.themeatrix.com)Why are family farms important?  
In addition to producing fresh, nutritious, high-quality foods, small family farms provide a wealth of benefits for their local communities and regions.

Perhaps most importantly, family farmers serve as responsible stewards of the land. Unlike industrial agriculture operations, which pollute communities with chemical [pesticides](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/pesticides), noxious [fumes](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/airpollution) and excess [manure](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/waste), small family farmers live on or near their farms and strive to preserve the surrounding environment for future generations. Since these farmers have a vested interest in their communities, they are more likely to use sustainable farming techniques to protect natural resources and human health.

The existence of family farms also guarantees the preservation of green space within the community. Unfortunately, once a family farm is forced out of business, the farmland is often sold for development, and the quality land and soil for farming are lost.

Independent family farms also play a vital role in rural [economies](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/economics). In addition to providing jobs to local people, family farmers also help support small businesses by purchasing goods and services within their communities. Meanwhile, [industrial agriculture](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/factoryfarming/) operations employ as few workers as possible and typically purchase supplies, equipment, and building materials from outside the local community.  Rural areas are then left with high rates of unemployment and very little opportunity for economic growth.

Finally, family farmers benefit society by boosting democratic values in their communities through active civic participation,v and by helping to preserve an essential connection between consumers, their food, and the land upon which this food is produced.

The loss of small family farms has dramatically reduced our supply of safe, fresh, sustainably-grown foods; it has contributed to the economic and social disintegration of rural communities; and it is eliminating an important aspect of our national heritage. If we lose our family farmers, we'll lose the diversity in our food supply, and what we eat will be dictated to us by a few large corporations. Clearly, family farms are a valuable resource worth preserving.  Now, more than ever, it’s important to realize that family farms are a valuable resource worth preserving.

**Sustainable Family Farming**

Just because a farm calls itself a “family farm,” it’s not necessarily sustainable.

During the 20th century, many family farms grew to industrial proportions, and today over half of the largest farms in the country are called “family farms.” iv

So if you truly want to support family farmers, make sure you buy your food from small, independent family farms that use sustainable farming methods to produce their food.

The Future of American Farming  
It's not too late to save rural America and family farms! Over the last several years, there has been an explosion of interest in small family farms, local food, and the preservation of rural communities and their heritage. Chefs, food lovers, citizens, parents, activists, students and many others are coming together to rediscover the benefits of eating sustainably-raised, locally grown food.  
There are organizations like [Slow Food](http://www.slowfoodusa.org/) that are encouraging people to slow down and enjoy home-cooked meals made from wholesome foods raised sustainably. [Heritage Foods USA](http://www.heritagefoodsusa.com/) and the [New England Heritage Breeds Conservancy](http://www.nehbc.org/) are working to preserve genetic diversity in animals by reintroducing breeds of farm animals that are near extinction. [Chefs Collaborative](http://www.chefscollaborative.org/) is an organization for chefs and people in the food industry who promote sustainably-raised, locally grown and artisanal food. [Farm Aid](http://www.farmaid.org/) works to support and save family farms. These are only a few of the many groups working to support sustainable agriculture and family farms.

What You Can Do

* Purchase food directly from your local family farmer at a [farmers market](http://www.sustainabletable.org/shop/markets/), at a farm stand, or through a [food co-op](http://www.sustainabletable.org/shop/co-ops/) or a [Community Supported Agriculture](http://www.sustainabletable.org/shop/csa/) (CSA) system. Visit our [Shopping Guides](http://www.sustainabletable.org/shop/guides/) section for more information.
* Ask the manager of your grocery store to supply foods produced at local family farms. Download “[I care about where my food comes from!](http://www.sustainabletable.org/shop/questions/questions_storemanager.pdf)” - a notecard you can give to your store manager.
* Donate money to [Farm Aid](http://www.farmaid.org/site/PageServer?pagename=support_donate) – Since 1985, this non-profit organization has worked to support America's family farmers.
* If you shop at a farmers market or buy directly from a farm, thank the farmer for providing you with such wholesome and delicious food. As long as farming is recognized as an important, rewarding profession, younger people will be encouraged to become farmers.

Did You Know?

* According to the EPA, 3,000 acres of productive U.S. farmland are lost to development every day.vi
* Between 1974 and 2002, the number of corporate-owned U.S. farms increased by more than 46 percent.vii
* 82% of Americans are somewhat or very concerned about the decreasing number of American farms. viii
* 85% of Americans trust smaller scale family farms to produce safe, nutritious food.ix
* In the US, the average principal farm operator is 55.3 years old.x
* Between 2005 and 2006, the US lost 8,900 farms (a little more than 1 farm per hour).xi

For More Information

* Visit [Farm Aid](http://www.farmaid.org/). Their web site outlines the challenges currently faced by family farmers and describes the organization's efforts to assist these farmers in their struggle.
* Take a look at the [Communities](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/community), [Workers](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/workers) and [Economics](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/economics/) sections of Sustainable Table for more information on the benefits of family farms and the problems with factory farming.

Sources

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<http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/familyfarms/>